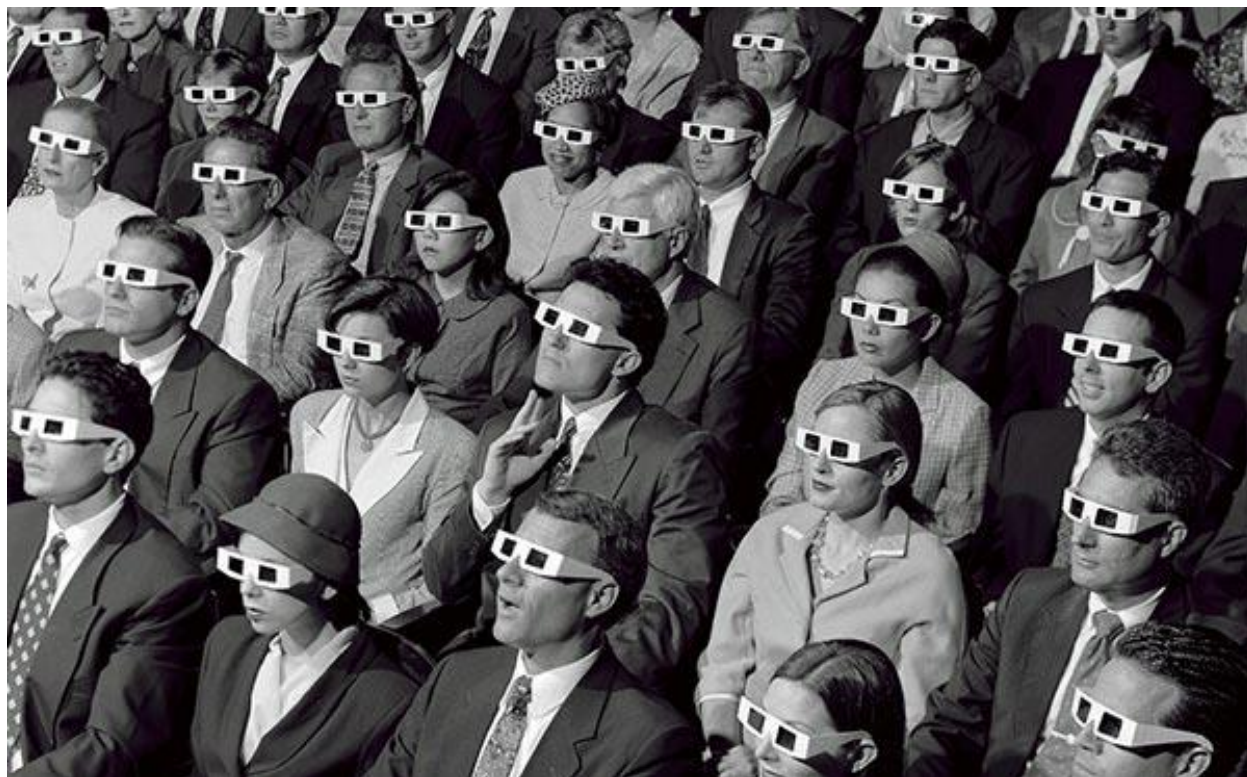


SECTARIAN DYNAMICS IN THE ISKCON TEMPLES OF SOUTH BRAZIL

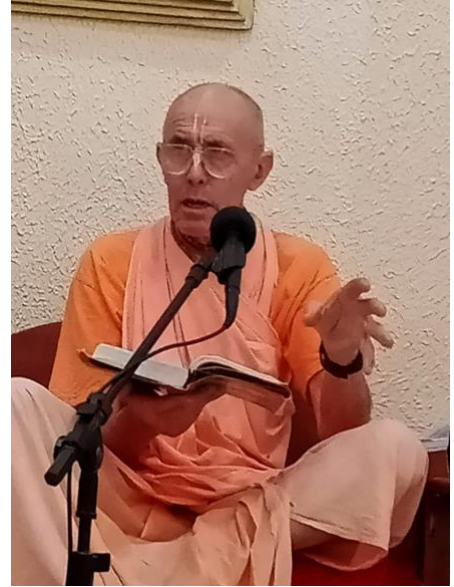


An offering of help by Kaunteya das

A member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness
Founder-Acarya, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada



EYE of the STORM



Dedicated to His Grace
Hara Kanta Prabhu, to his
followers, and especially to
his ex-followers

INTRODUCTION

I have personally observed (and I have received multiple reliable reports about) many serious irregularities in the conduct of the ISKCON temples of South Brazil.

Abuses, mistreatments, public humiliations, strange cultural peculiarities, insane social theories, institutional insubordination, disobedience to the spiritual master, questionable propagation strategies... the list goes on. To add insult to injury, the perpetrators of this kaleidoscopic display of weirdness define their system as Srila Prabhupada's "traditional model."



Of course, as I have already previously written, there are positive aspects as well (whatever really comes from Srila Prabhupada, like book distribution, *japa*, *kirtana* and a few more practices), but the whole thing is permeated and affected by fanaticism, narrow-mindedness, and obsessive criticism of senior devotees - all signs of *tamo-guna*; all symptoms of a deep spiritual and psychological malady; all sources of degradation in the long run.

The devotees serving in these temples are what we can define "good devotees," even "very good devotees": austere, dedicated, disciplined... some of them are even smart. Therefore, one wonders: why such serious Vaisnavas, even intelligent ones, end up acting in such strange and dangerous ways? Why they burn so many people? Why they create so much pain and frustration? Why they attract so many damaged and problematic individuals?

I believe it won't be too useful to simply identify and address the specific misbehaviors and the single episodes. We should investigate the allegations of psychological abuse and other forms of violence. We owe it to the victims. We should properly discipline those found guilty, aiming at their reform and purification, but unless we understand the root of the problem, the overall framework that allows and perpetuates abuse, we will not resolve the fundamental issue.

In this essay I am presenting an attempt at explaining the overall social and psychological dynamic that generates and sustain the irregularities. In simple words, we are dealing with a cult, a "totalist system" that prevents clear thinking, mature self-evaluation and harmonious living.

I offer my respectful obeisance to Hara Kanta and his followers, and I regret having to share considerations that may disturb their minds. I pray that they may be able to accept this essay in the best spirit and take it as an inspiration to re-integrate in a broader vision of Srila Prabhupada's movement.

This writing is not a personal attack on Hara Kanta Prabhu - a person I respect and even revere on so many levels - or on his small band of followers.

The spirit is: "hate the sin, not the sinner."

My service is to try to assist ISKCON Brazil; there are issues and challenges in various places of this vast country (as in every country), but what I see in the ISKCON temples of the South, I believe, requires special and immediate attention. I don't believe Hara Kanta Das has any willingness to change (they say that you cannot teach new tricks to an old swan...), but his supporters are younger, so I like to think that

for them there is still hope. Otherwise, they will also perpetuate the unhealthy patterns they have imbibed - and many more people will suffer.

The Five Elements of a Totalist Group

The first step to solve a problem is admitting that there is one.

The next step is to understand the nature and deep cause of the problem. In one sense, there are no new problems. After all, there are only three *gunas*, combining since time immemorial. Everything already happened trillions of times before, with different names and in different places, and we should learn from the past to create a better future, to solve and prevent the mistakes that were made.



In this case we are dealing with cultic, sectarian behavior - something found in different degrees in many organizations (religious, political and so on). ISKCON is not a "cult" - is a spiritual movement for the re-spiritualization of society, based on authentic revealed texts - but pockets of ISKCON, due to a certain permutation of the *gunas*, at times become affected by sectarian attitudes and practices. Because the *gunas* are universal, many considerations in this essay may apply to situations in other parts of the world.

We will apply the five academically recognized parameters of a totalist system to the temples of the South of Brazil. We will use the research presented in the essay "How Totalism Works," by Alexandra Stein:

<https://aeon.co/essays/how-cult-leaders-brainwash-followers-for-total-control>

The five features of a cultic movement delineated in the article are:

1. Charisma & authoritarianism
2. Isolation
3. Total ideology
4. Fear & "love"
5. Followers neglect their personal needs.

All of the above, unfortunately, are present in Hara Kanta's group, as we will show.

I will quote some short excerpts from the paper and will offer my commentary.

A direct eye-witness, a person I have a lot of respect for, because of her extraordinary *sadhana* and focused engagement in *bhakti-yoga*, after reading the above article wrote me:

"I read the full article now. And after 8 years living in the 'sankirtana sul yatra' I can say: it's exactly like that."

1. Charisma & Authoritarianism

The article explains: "The first of these characteristics [the five features of a totalist system] is that the leader is both charismatic and authoritarian. Without charisma, the leader would be unable to draw people to him or herself. Without authoritarianism, leaders would lack the internal motivation and the ability to bully and control followers."

It's a fact: Hara Kanta Prabhu possesses charisma: "a powerful personal quality that some people have to attract and influence other people." Due to his austerities, his years of engagement in intense (especially physical) devotional service, his personal sacrifice, his sense control, his celibacy, Hara Kanta has charisma.

Despite his poor grasp of the philosophy; despite his poor Portuguese (a sign of limited intellectual capacity); despite his issues with anger; despite all of his other personal issues, he undoubtedly has the power to attract others. What kind of people does he attract? I don't have clear data about how many are psychologically well-adjusted individuals and how many are people with substantial emotional issues.

Let's remember that in Max Weber's sociological model, *charisma* is a neutral term, not necessarily positive or "spiritual" (even Hitler was charismatic) but the power is there; we need to accept the fact.

Authoritarianism is another recognizable characteristic of his leadership.



Some people feel the need, the compulsion to control the lives of others. Why Hara Kanta feels that? I am not his psychotherapist (and if I were I would be bound by

confidentiality) and I don't know. I don't know about his childhood. What kind of parents he had? How much affection he received from his mother? What was the relation of his father? Was he also autocratic and inflexible? What kind of environment he grew up in? What happened when he was in the military?

We might not know the causes, but his neurotic need to control others is apparent.

His lack of finesse in directing others is also evident. What brought him to this point, that despite not being equipped to lead in a mature or expert way, he is so determined to dominate them? What kind of emotional deprivations, devastating traumas, deep insecurities he might have experienced or is experiencing? What created this unhealthy authoritarianism? What pushed him to become the leader of the cult? This would be the subject for a clinical study. Here - regardless of the causes - we are only focusing on the displayed behavior. And that's seriously troubling in itself.

His followers should carefully consider: how much he sees them as partners in the mission or as minions in his fight with the world? Did they notice how he turns sour and antagonistic when he "smells" even a hint of insubordination?

Have they seen how he suddenly starts treating devotees as "traitors" when they express any form of self-sufficiency, any desire of living as autonomous adults?

How can they not suspect any deficiency even after seeing his dichotomous approach? This will be explained later, by the following elements of a totalist system.

2. Isolation

"These leaders rule over isolating, steeply hierarchical and closed structures . . . This isolating structure is the second characteristic of a totalist group . . . In fact, far from finding true comradeship or companionship, followers face a triple isolation: from the outside world, from each other within the closed system, and from their own internal dialogue, where clear thinking about the group might arise."



For control to be effectively complete, the followers need to be isolated - especially from the rest of ISKCON, because if they are exposed to various spiritual leaders, if they listen to other *sadhus* and Vaisnavas of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness they may realize that the so-called "traditional model" is just a sham, a deception.

Isolation by Demonization

Separatism is promoted by generating a sense of fear of association with the "other" (even if this "other" are saintly Vaisnavas, such as ISKCON gurus and *sannyasis* in good standing). Everyone outside the small circle is deviated, especially if they dare pointing out the shortcomings of the head of the cult.

ISKCON Brazil is blessed with a variety of insightful, accomplished Vaisnavas, authors of books, leaders of communities, experienced and accomplished preachers and

teachers. But they must be demonized. They must be delegitimized. They must be vilified so that the members of the sect don't feel attracted to them, don't expand their vision of Krishna consciousness beyond the sect.

I was shocked when, about one year ago, I started personally dialoguing with members of the sect. They bitterly vomited insults on everyone. Chandramukha Maharaja? Terrible. Dhanvantari Maharaja? Horrible. Hridayananda Maharaja? Practically the devil personified (otherwise how to condone Hara Kanta's rejection of his *diksa-guru*?). Even mild, sober, sweet Yamunacarya Maharaja was criticized. (His crime? Once he said that, in this historical phase, ISKCON is mostly a congregational, home-based movement - which is a demonstrable fact - but the southern temple leaders didn't like that.)

I was surprised and pained by listening to *brahmacaris* - in the movement for 5 years - freely slandering *sannyasis* who had been in the movement 40, 50 or more years. Is Srila Prabhupada's "traditional model," that young *brahmacaris* heavily insult their seniors?

But in the sectarian dynamics this perversion of *dharma*, this mockery of *varnasrama*, is encouraged and cultivated because it's essential to maintain isolation. In fact, the very institution of *sannyasa* should be disparaged; therefore taking *sannyasa* becomes described in the cult as something done only by those who want name and prestige.

It almost as if instead of the Gaudiya-vaisnava *sampradaya* these devotees follow the Ramacandra Puri method of criticizing everyone.

Institutional Isolation

The temple presidents of the southern temples are not allowed (and don't allow themselves) to fulfill their duties as members of the national council; simple duties such as joining the WhatsApp group of the CGB (*Conselho Governamental do Brasil*), participate in the occasional meetings and vote.

One excuse is pretty childish: when they participated in CGB meeting they have been criticized and felt ridiculed for the way they dressed. Some "progressives" told them

that they are outdated. "Progressives," of course, can also be dogmatic and insensitive. "Liberals" can be most illiberal and vehemently intolerant. But this is no sufficient excuse to avoid performing one's ISKCON duties. It is not the "traditional model" of Srila Prabhupada to give up one's duties at the first difficulties.

They also point out how there are differences of opinions with other devotees. So what? There are differences of opinions even among the GBCs; that's why there are discussions and then there is voting. And sometimes one's idea doesn't get accepted. This is called "adult life" - but when there are disagreements children "take their own toys and go home."

Isolation, isolation, isolation. Isolation is an essential ingredient. Without isolation the cult crumbles because it becomes clear that:

1. There are many other leaders in ISKCON.
2. There are many other more qualified leaders in ISKCON, more mature and loving.
3. There are many other good ideas - perfectly in line with Srila Prabhupada's mood and mission - but these ideas clash with the stereotyped dogmas of the leader of the cult.
4. There are more successful projects, in which people feel happier and healthier, in which the devotees attract better people.
5. The leader is exposed as a small fish in a big ocean (instead of a big fish in a small pond).
6. The "traditional model" they profess is shown to be only a constrained, artificial understanding of the oceanic legacy of Srila Prabhupada.

They may say this and that, but the "logic" of isolation compels them not to participate, to avoid dialogue. In April 2022, for instance, I sat with Hara Kanta Prabhu for more than one hour. He started by saying something vague, something like, "You are from a different line; you subscribe to a different way." Hmm? We belong to the same religious group, chant the same *mantra*, eat the same food... I was interested to hear what he meant, and I asked him, "What do you mean? What different line are you referring to?" But he just escaped, "You know, you know..." "No," I said, I actually do not know." I wanted to hear from him, to understand his vision, his priorities, his

philosophy; but he refused dialogue and we went into other, less "existential" topics. Isolation. Someone comes all the way to Florianopolis to talk with him, and he isolates himself.

Sad.

Back to the institutional isolation: in July 2021 the Latin RGB (Regional Governing Body) wrote to the southern leaders to cooperate with the CGB. The RGB, among other things, instructed them:

"We write to you to recommend you resume another important aspect of your service: some of you have the right - and the duty - to participate in the national dialogue, meetings and voting . . . Being a true leader in ISKCON requires fulfilling whatever duties are necessary - including for national unity and harmony - even if sometimes we might find these duties unpleasant, difficult or temporarily unfruitful."

But the leader of the sect doesn't care about being "a true leader in ISKCON." His priority, his psychological need is to control his small band of followers. And therefore the request of the RGB was rejected. There are very senior Srila Prabhupada's disciples in the RGB; GBCs, gurus, *sannyasis*... respectable Vaisnavas like Guru Prasad Maharaja, Virabahu Prabhu, Bhakti Prabhupada-vrata Damodara Maharaja, Bhakti Sundara Maharaja, as well as other senior, mature devotees like Hanuman Prabhu. But... who cares? the cult must be maintained in isolation, at any cost, even of open rebellion.

The RGB letter continued:

"We hear about the concerns that you have with aspects of the rest of the country. We recognize that at least some of these complaints are legitimate. Despite these grievances, we encourage and direct you to work with the rest of ISKCON Brazil as one big team, one big family, to improve what needs to be improved, to offer your valuable input and to benefit from the input of the many other sincere devotees in the country . . . As Srila Prabhupada said: 'Your love for me will be shown by how much you cooperate to keep this institution together after I am gone.' (*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrita*, Chapter 52)

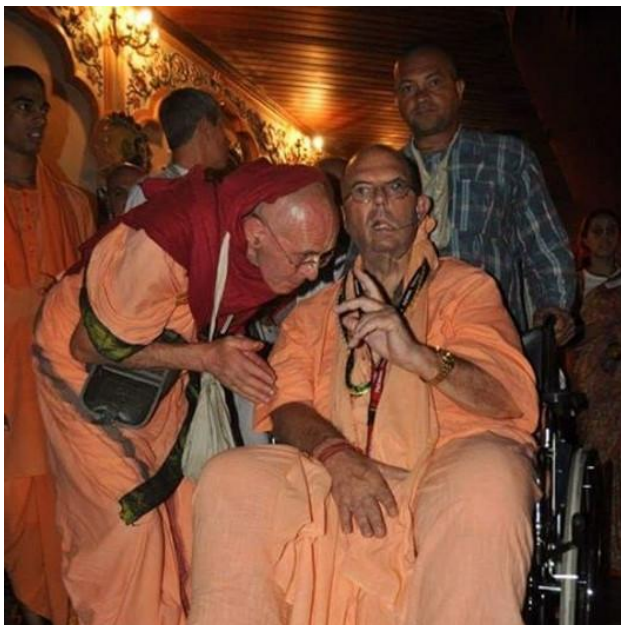
Srila Prabhupada also wrote, 'Now, we have by Krsna's Grace built up something significant in the shape of this ISKCON and we are all one family. Sometimes there may be disagreement and quarrel but we should not go away. These inebrieties can be adjusted by the cooperative spirit, tolerance and maturity.' (Letter to Babhru, 9 Dec 1973)

Your traditional values and your sincerity will be confirmed and enhanced by aligning with such instructions from Srila Prabhupada regarding cooperation."

The problem is that there are no real "traditional values" in the cult. The "traditional model" slogan is an empty shell, a cover-up for a totalistic, close system. Was Srila Prabhupada "traditional model" to disobey a direct request from an authorized continental governing body?

Isolation from Their Own Initiating Spiritual Master

The astute reader may wonder, "But, their *diksa-guru*, Jayapataka Maharaja, is also a member of the Latin RGB. He also participated in writing the letter; he also signed it. Maybe it's understandable that they disobey the others - although it's very bad in itself - but how can they so openly disobey their guru? And for a request so reasonable as to work within the CGB?"



Because to guarantee control isolation must be total. Isolation means isolation from everyone, including the guru. The "laws of a totalist systems" are higher than the "laws of disciplic succession." So, between the two, the members of the sect will choose to follow the head of the cult, not their initiating spiritual master.

"But how is that possible?" You may wonder. It's possible because the dynamics of isolation built the false philosophy that the leader is the

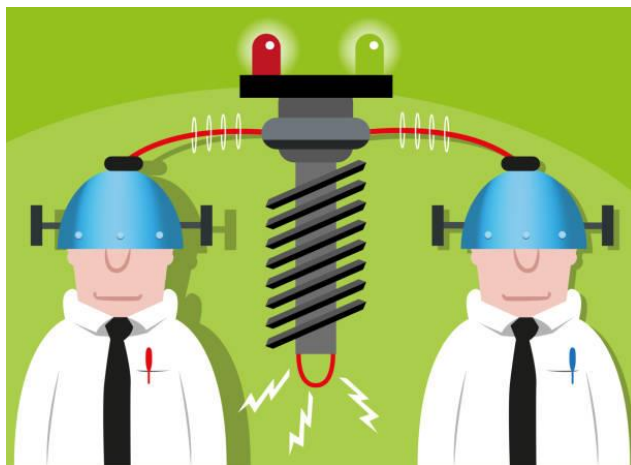
"transparent media," the one who truly understands the mind of the guru. So, even when the guru sends a written and signed instruction, they disregard it if the leader of the cult doesn't allow them to follow it.

"But this is absurd!" You may say. Yes, it is absurd, but the sectarian mindset, the groupthink doesn't follow the laws of *bhakti* or of rational thought. The priority is not *devotion*, is *submission*. It's a different planet. If you don't live there, it's very difficult to understand how it works, because it functions according to pathological dynamics, not rational considerations.

Now, Jayapataka Maharaja knows about (at least some of) the issues. I personally read letters from Maharaja to disciples (such as previous members of the sect) that expressed the craziness of the situation. He is not intervening not because he agrees with everything Hara Kanta says and does, but because he is afraid that Hara Kanta may again leave ISKCON (as he did in the past), carrying with him other devotees.

Isolation from Other Members of the Sect

As the article on which this essay is based explains: "far from finding true comradeship or companionship, followers face . . . isolation . . . from each other within the closed system."



In other words, although the cult might appear very integrated, with the members acting in unison, between them there is suspicion and fear. They can't open their mind to each other due to fear that they may be considered disloyal to the chief and to the group. Doubts are therefore occulted, hidden. There is no true friendship or openness among the members of the sect because any whiff of

misalignment would be treated as a grievous *apradha*, a mortal sin. The unity is fictitious because artificial and brittle, maintained by fear and not by affection.

Loyalty to the leader is paramount; relations with any other member can and are quickly sacrificed if that member shows any sign of autonomous thinking.

Srila Prabhupada demonstrated the most non-sectarian mood when he wrote: "[Krishna consciousness movement is for training men to be independently thoughtful.](#)" (Letter to Karandhara, 22 Dec 1972) But in a totalist system this is anathema, as being intellectually autonomous is a great insult to the cult leader. And it must be punished.

Just like the *brahmani* who didn't do anything wrong but only expressed a diminished enthusiasm in listening to the leader. She was removed from the so-called "Council of the *Brahmanas*"; and even her husband couldn't or wouldn't do anything to protect her.

Brahmanas are supposed to be the intellectual leaders of society, to think with their own head, but in a totalist system they must act like *sudras* - obey and shut up. And therefore the fear, the constant suspicion even among the members of the sect.

Revealing one's mind might attract a heavy reprimand and cost one's social status.

[Isolation from Themselves](#)

In this situation, the members of the sect build internal walls so that they can't even reveal to *themselves* their doubts, their reservations about the leader.



It's a condition of rigorous self-censorship. If any thought that could be considered defiant toward the leader starts to appear in the intelligence, it is immediately silenced, not allowing it to be processed or analyzed.

As the article on which this essay is based said: "followers face . . . isolation . . . from their own internal dialogue, where clear thinking about the group might arise."

The followers of Hara Kanta Das have developed the expertise to immediately sanitizing every skepticism, any trace of suspicion about his behavior. (Those who have not developed or maintained this skill have left the cult long time ago.)

For instance, if the follower starts wondering, "How come Hara Kanta Prabhu is so interested, so absorbed in regulating the sex life of the *grihasthas*? Is that normal for a *brahmacari*?" Their defensive mechanism immediately removes any doubt that he might have repressed sexual desires that manifest in that way. "No, it's his mercy that he gets involved in the reproductive details of his flock."

"How come Hara Kanta Prabhu performs weddings? Is this the *dharma* of a *brahmacari*? Is there any reference in Srila Prabhupada's books - or in the whole Vedic literature - about *brahmacaris* performing marriages?" The suppression-mechanism immediately springs into action, "No, it's his love and affection - and his great advancement - that allows him to transcend *varnasrama* regulations. Yes, there are *grihastha brahmanas* who could do the ceremony, but our fearless leader doesn't care about the rules and regulations. He must be on a spontaneous platform of *bhakti*."



"We are supposed to follow the 'traditional model' of Srila Prabhupada, but where or when Srila Prabhupada ever recommended to wear our *chadars* like that, crossing them in front of the chest? Is there any instruction like that, anywhere? Is there any instruction that girls should wear baggy t-shirts? Most photos with Srila Prabhupada only show devotees dressing differently, with civil clothes in the first few years; and with *dhoties* and *kurtas* in the following

period." But the editing function of the mind argues, "No, our leader is closer than us to Krishna and he knows how we should dress! These crisscrossing chadars are divinely inspired! And women should look like bags of potatoes to prevent lusty thoughtsdev!"

"Srila Prabhupada wrote to a leader - specifying that this instruction was for all leaders: 'my request to you is that you enter into the universities and colleges wherever possible and preach there with a view to recruiting some first-class devotees . . . Overall there is shortage of first-class, experienced men to manage things just to the highest standard, as you are doing. Therefore I am calling upon you the big leaders to push this idea forward, namely, to attract some educated men to join us.' (Letter to Sukadeva, 13 Dec 1972) If Srila Prabhupada wanted to attract educated people, why we are spending so much time, money and energy to feed the homeless and the addicts? How can we support the idea that focusing on the destitute and the uneducated is Srila Prabhupada's 'traditional model'"? The expurgation process jumps to neutralize the observation: "Our leader is so merciful, so compassionate, he sees the spirit soul within everyone's heart, even the most fallen. He is truly *patita-pavana*. It is not that he doesn't preach to intelligent people because he is not capable to do that. It is not that he doesn't try to attract educated devotees because he is afraid that they will perceive his fanaticism. No, he is an ocean of undifferentiated mercy; he is beyond mundane discriminations."

I could go on with examples of things the members of the sect *must notice* but block and suppress, terrified by the prospect of being "offensive." (It's a fact, in a cult using the intelligence Krishna gave us is a great sin.) They see but they don't actually see, because of the powerful social and psychological filters, because of self-suppression.

It's like Sukadeva Goswami says in the *Bhagavatam*: "*paśyann api na paśyati*" - the followers must have seen weirdness, but they have not actually seen it. The social cost is too high. Not only that; the personal cost is also too high: which devotee wishes to realize to have been deceived into believing something opposite of what Srila Prabhupada wanted?

The various levels of isolation - isolation from the rest of ISKCON (including one's guru), isolation from other members of the sect, and isolation from one's own cognitive faculties - are the essential ingredients for maintaining a totalist system.

And let me open a parenthesis here. I don't want the reader to think that I consider Hara Kanta Das some sort of evil genius. No, he is actually a very simple person. Even



an innocent person. Even a saintly person. He didn't study the dynamics of dictatorship and then maliciously applied them to his group. No; not at all. It's all kind of spontaneous and organic: his inner pulsion *forces* him to act in autocratic ways. Without senior association, he finds hard to recognize the limits of his intuition, the shortcomings of his understanding. And so he acts impulsively; and because he is not very brainy, he lives - and forces others to live - within a cocoon of half-baked beliefs and half-digested truths. He also victimizes himself by imposing isolation on himself. By rejecting senior

association, he condemns himself to not learn; to not grow as a human being (what to speak of as a leader).

Which brings us to the next point: an oversimplified, distorted vision of life and of ISKCON convicts the group to adopt a simplistic, circumscribed worldview.

3. Total Ideology

Typical of sectarian environments are simplistic slogans and jingoistic platitudes. These are often superficial and misleading, but because they come from the leader, they are taken as sacred and authoritative.

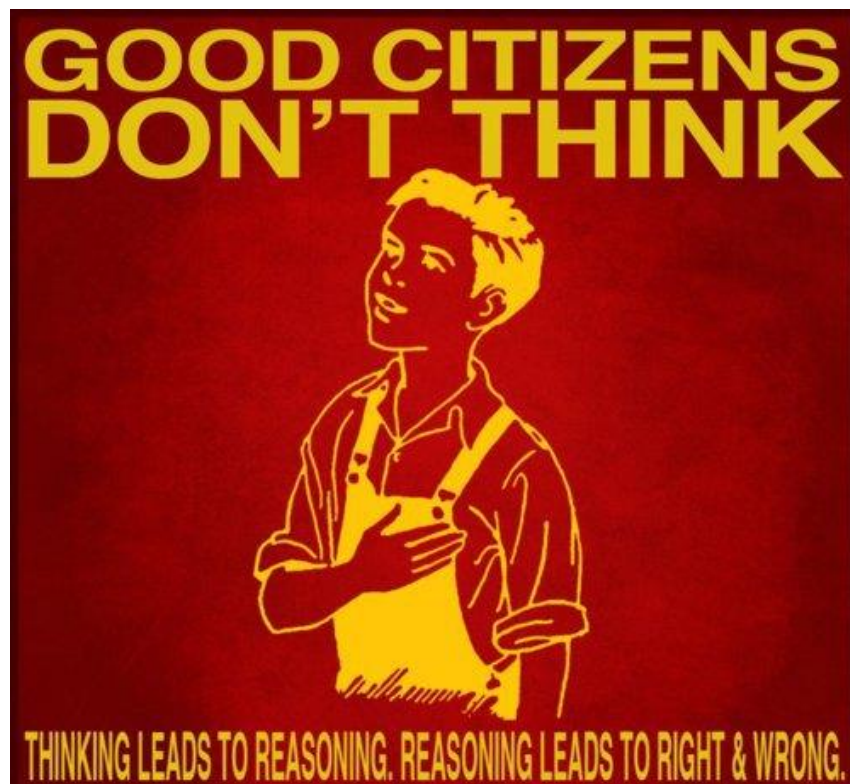
Similarly, a Hare Krishna sect - like in South Brazil - may have a few, good, ideas about the mission (book distribution, for example); but because they take those few ideas as *everything* (rejecting or neglecting so many other Srila Prabhupada's instructions), and because they intensely criticize others, their knowledge remains influenced by the mode of ignorance; it remains



tainted by narrow-mindedness and fanaticism. And that's why they face so many problems, so many obstacles in forming a mature, harmonious community. That's why they create so much defection and despair.

When they wrote me defining their concept of "traditional model," they quoted a fragment of a letter from Srila Prabhupada. That was their complete definition of their "traditional model"?! I was shocked. A piece of a letter? What about Srila Prabhupadas's other 7,000 letters?

When I saw that they rejected the instruction of the Latin RGB (and that they disobeyed their own guru) I thought the leaders in the southern temples were just hypocrites; that they liked to present themselves as loyal followers, but they didn't really want to loyally follow. They liked the prestige and the credit of calling themselves traditionalists, but without the substance. But later I understood; they are not hypocrites; they are simply obfuscated. For instance, how can they take as a spiritual leader someone who rejected his own bona fide spiritual master?



They are so covered by the sectarian mentality to be unable to spot basic contradictions. They are not bad; they are just unthinking victims of a cult. (Or, rather, all their thinking goes into supporting their narrow views.)

For instance, they have subscribed to the slogan that they follow Srila Prabhupada's "traditional model." They seem not to understand that the whole Gaudiya-vaisnavism tradition is a tradition of innovation. Srila Prabhupada himself - in the twelve years he was directly at the helm of ISKCON - constantly showed a drive of innovativeness, of creating new initiatives, of adjusting things that needed improvement.

Srila Prabhupada wrote: "[The Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is not stereotyped or stagnant.](#)" (Cc, *Adi-lila* 7.28, purport) and "[The expert devotees also can discover novel ways and means to convert the foolish non-devotees in terms of particular time and circumstances.](#)" (SB 1.5.16, 1962 edition)

In 1970, for instance, he established that *sannyasis* could not become GBCs. And he enforced that rule. But then he noticed that *grihasthas* were not as dynamic as the *sannyasis* and after two years he changed the rule: from then also *sannyasis* could serve on the GBC.

How many examples should I share? Should we remember that in the beginning, in New York, he tried renting a theatre for preaching, but then settled for going to the park? Or how, when he started preaching in India, he completely changed the strategy that was applied in the West, from street *harinamas*, to making life members?

There are principles and details (on how to apply those principles). The principle is distributing knowledge, distributing the *sastras* or literature based on the *sastras*. It can be done by distributing printed books, or by distributing e-books, or by distributing audiobooks. It's all the same thing. The "traditional model" is distributing knowledge; in what form that knowledge is distributed is a detail.

Of course, Srila Prabhupada didn't speak of Kindle; it wasn't existing then.

But it could be very hard to assimilate this simple concept if you have been brainwashed that one way is the only way.

The reference article explains: "The third element of totalism is the total ideology . . . The exclusive belief system is controlled entirely by the leader, empowering him or her through the creation of a fictional world of secrets and lies . . . The lies created a fictional world that became more bizarre, elaborate and far from normality the further into the system one got.

The fictional, invented quality of the total ideology reinforces the confusion and eventual dissociation experienced by followers . . . The extreme disconnect leaves the follower helpless to understand what is really happening . . . things that seemed preposterous seem normal."

And so, for instance, you have an old *brahmacari* seriously involved in the details of the sex lives of married couples. In any normal, sane ISKCON community this would set off all kinds of alarm bells. Not in Hara Kanta-loka.

Once you accept the leader as perfect and pure, beyond scrutiny and above reproach, you also accept that whatever he does is also perfect and pure. And doubting him is *maya*.

As Voltaire wrote: "Whoever can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities. If the God-given understanding of your mind does not resist a demand to believe what is impossible, then you will not resist a demand to do wrong to that God-given sense of justice in your heart. As soon as one faculty of your soul has been dominated, other faculties will follow as well. And from this derives all those crimes of religion which have overrun the world."

The leader could peacefully explain, in private, what you did wrong; but instead, he bursts into a fit of anger and shouts at you in front of everyone else, using words like thunderbolts, words that humiliate and discourage you? It's your fault. You are not sincere enough. He is just giving you the mercy. He doesn't have anger issues - IT IS YOU WHO IS NOT SUBMISSIVE ENOUGH!

You have shut off your discriminating power and so you will supinely tolerate that abuse. And you will tolerate the violence on others. You will look the other side.

Many devotees can't take any more of the lunatic lifestyle and move away. They are described as weak and insincere; even malicious and malevolent - otherwise how could they ever have left the holy leader, the representative of God?

Actions Need a Certain Quality to Represent Srila Prabhupada

We cannot just label an activity done in *tamo-guna* as part of the "traditional model." It's not only *what* one does, but *how* one does it. It's not because I am doing an action that, yes, was promoted by Srila Prabhupada, then my job is finished; my service is perfect and complete. A certain *quality* of the action makes it genuine and healthy. Srila Prabhupada, for instance, certainly wanted temples, but the temples should not become shelters for unwanted, disturbed people.

When I was in Curitiba, for instance, a lady in the temple was coming for *mangala-arati*. She looked strange or depressed (or both), sort of catatonic. When I went for a *japa*-walk after *mangala-arati* I saw her smoking a cigarette in the street.

When the topic came up with the devotee managing the temple, he said things like, "You know, her children hate her; she doesn't have anywhere to go... so we keep her here; I know that she is smoking but, what to do? We are giving her a chance" Very kind soul this temple manager... Srila Prabhupada wanted temples; but did he want this type of characters to live in his temples? And when you keep this kind of people in the temple, do you think that normal people would be attracted to live alongside them?

In the temple there was also a new boy; someone who had recently been a patient in a psychiatric hospital or something.

Then, also in Curitiba, I met another... peculiar young man, he had lived in the temple for some time. At one point he tried to kill himself. When I brought this up to the temple manager, he reassured me: "No, no, his whole family is messed up; all drug addicts and full of other problems. He was already ruined when he joined the temple." Oh, he was already seriously damaged!? But then why was he allowed to live in the temple?

Maybe we should just change the sign outside, from "Hare Krishna Temple" to "Hare Krishna Lunatic Asylum." That would be more coherent.

So, it's not just that any *action* can be characterized as "traditional."

The Process of Indoctrination Starts Slowly

The imposition of the "total ideology" doesn't start from day one. Before that there are milder approaches, friendlier, softer forms of propaganda and recruitment.

The article continues: "After propaganda comes indoctrination, the state where the totalist system consolidates control, via . . . 'the power to drop iron curtains to prevent anyone's disturbing, by the slightest reality, the gruesome quiet of an entirely imaginary world'. After the iron curtain of the total ideology has dropped, no questions or doubts are allowed. Should you voice your concerns, a network of monitors will turn you in for reeducation. Should that reeducation fail . . . then you are cut from the group, never to speak with your former compatriots again."

Those who have freed themselves from the South Brazilian cult, and have experienced this ostracization, can relate to the above. They have felt on their skin, on their mind and heart the attempts to make them feel guilty and defective. To make them feel as losers.

It may take years to wash out the shame.

That's why I am focusing so much on this "community." Because so many people have been hurt and traumatized. So many still experience pain. I don't want this to happen to the present "cult members" or to future enrollees; that's why I am taking a stand, with the risk of being branded as "offensive." Actually, it would be offensive on my part if I would simply ignore what's going on. (It would be simpler, but it would be an insult to the past, present and future victims). If I can prevent even one devotee from going through this torture, I can consider my efforts worthy.

One might wonder, but why on Earth would anyone accept to live in such a system? Which brings us to the next element, the system of punishments and rewards, the

system of emotional blackmailing. The stick and the carrot (like for animals; only a little subtler).

4. "Love" & Fear



This is the subtlest and most pernicious aspect of totalist systems.

The article explains: "For a totalist system to wield complete control, the leader must tap fear – this is the fourth element of totalism . . . the leader or group alternates terror with ‘love’ . . .

this type of fear-based relationship . . . has a two-fold result: a confused emotional bonding to the source of fear in a failed attempt to seek comfort, and a cognitive dissociation, that is, the inability to think about one’s feelings. Fear or stress without escape – ‘fright without solution’. . . – is a traumatic state that derails a person’s ability to think logically and clearly about the situation and therefore to take action to resolve it . . .

Having disabled logical thinking about the traumatic relationship, the leader can then introduce even more of the fictitious ideology to explain away and redirect the follower’s terror . . . cultic systems will attempt to interfere with and control any alternative attachment relationships a person might have. To fail to do so would allow the follower to find a safe haven elsewhere and potentially escape the emotional and cognitive control of the group. This is the same thing we see in controlling relationships

such as in cases of domestic violence, of the Stockholm Syndrome or, frequently, with pimps and prostitutes, as well as in human trafficking."

There are more details in the article, but what's described above are recognizable and demonstrable dynamics we witness in the South. There is an initial "emotional honeymoon" in which the victim (generally a vulnerable, unfulfilled individual) "falls in love" with the leader of the sect. New people believe that in the "total ideology" and in the (fictitious) closeness of the group they'll find the emotional shelter and fulfillment they so eagerly seek; but then they experience psychological abuse, rudeness, and harsh ostracization when they express any slight divergence or any hesitation to fully surrender.

Like chakora birds eager to be fed by the moon-rays, the follower treasures every little personal attention the leader mercifully bestows on them. The leader provides those sustaining "drops of nectar" in the form of encouragement, personal attention, doctrinal sharing and direct guidance.

But these nourishments do not come cheap. They are only bestowed on the loyal followers, those willing to set aside their discriminating power. You need to switch off your brain to attract the grace of the leader, or you need to attune your brain to the pathological wavelength of the leader. You must accept the leader as the be-all-and-end-all, the personification of goodness. You must interpret his immature tantrums as "divine mercy."

Another person whom I respect deeply - also because of her capacity of exiting the cult and remaining a dedicated Vaisnavis (not like the many that simply crashed and burned) - wrote to me, displaying a lot of maturity and honesty:

"This message has two objectives, first of all, to thank you for your courage in writing that report in a clear and precise way about what is happening in the leadership of the South . . . another reason is that after reading your report, emotional triggers were awakened, and I would like to reveal these remembrances.

I lived in the temples of the South for 3 years . . . When I got to know the movement, I saw that image of Prabhu Hara Kanta running and serving, such dedicated personality, at such advanced age. After that, the inmates begin to preach about the glories of Prabhu Hara Kanta, how he is sincere and how he is a pure devotee. That sweet, kind, enthusiastic and loving figure captivates the heart of who searches for a spiritual master . . . Most of the people there (including me), suffered with some emotional problem of paternal deprivation, and found in Prabhu Hara Kanta the emotional paternal comfort that internally (and unknowingly) we needed.

As you surrender, this sweet figure ceases to exist and the rudeness, masked as correction, comes into play . . . I have many memories of the hostile way he treated me, most of the time publicly . . .

'You question too much; just do what I am ordering you...'

'I don't want to hear; just do what I say'

'A service machine like you doesn't have to worry about reading time.'

'Your problem is that you think too much, just trust me' . . .

I could list many more phrases like these; most of the time the scolding could have been solved with a simple private conversation.

But the scolding is public and humiliating and if you complain is because you are not sincere and do not understand how a pure spiritual master acts.

When we decided to go out of the temple. . . Prabhu Hara Kanta . . . [started] screaming and went completely out of control, he said that this was not his preaching system and that it was better that we just go away . . .

In my experience, things I saw and heard, when it comes to belittling other leaders, there is always a justification. When it's about Prabhu Hara Kanta, there is always a defense.

Whoever is inside doesn't really see the situation. And everyone who is outside, if they don't agree with Prabhu Hara Kanta they are fallen, deviated or are not sincere enough."

Totalism.

Control.

Inner and outer isolation.

"Love" & fear.

A typical cult. An emotional trap for vulnerable people.

The message continues: "I would not like to extend this message, nor make this message a lamentation. I am also grateful for the teachings and for the many things I have learned! I recognize the Prabhu's sincerity in serving and his dedication to maintaining the temples even with so much difficulty. But to say anything about Prabhu Hara Kanta other than to glorify him, his disciples take it as an offense.

When I read your letter, I felt bad for a few days remembering many situations I went through. But I would really like to thank you for writing and sharing. Reading your report also brought me relief and peace!"

So much pain, disappointment and disenchantment behind this pendulum of "love" (little drops of attention) and fear (thunderbolts of punishment and humiliation).

5. The Followers Neglect Their Own Needs

The article continues: "Isolating and fear-driven systems led by authoritarian figures yield deployable followers who override their own survival needs and autonomy in the service of the group. This creation of deployable followers is the fifth characteristic of

such groups . . . we can see the destructive power of this coercive psychological control put in place by pathological leaders."

Because of being practically brainwashed, the sect members accept hurtful situations as normal. Their living conditions affect their own well-being and reveal themselves unsustainable in the long run.

Visualize the following examples. Do they sound authentic? Do you recognize the people involved? These episodes reveal how, when disoriented and manipulated, devotees can totally disregard their legitimate emotional, physical, clinical or living needs. This causes great havoc in their lives; in the short- and long-run.

A follower gets married. After some time, the wife is tired/fried of the conditions in the temple and goes home for a time. Instructed by the leader to ignore her, the husband completely disconnects with her, not trying to help or support her in any way. She becomes depressed and tries to commit suicide. He continues neglecting her. Finally the marriage is broken. The husband loses the wife (but maintains the trust of the leader). The wife moves on, far from the sect.

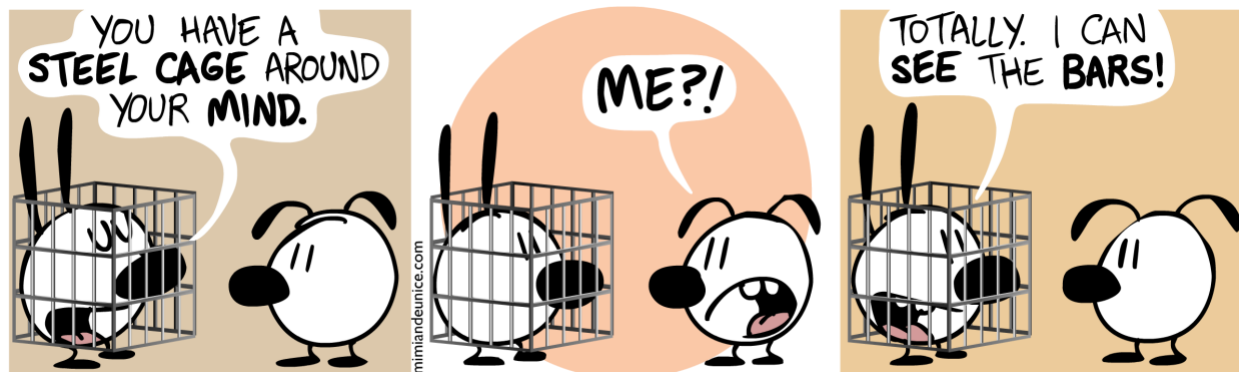
A young couple with child is "inspired" to live, as a family, in a single room in the temple - a dark, old, tamasic place - The conditions are unnatural and untenable, but they endure them for years. Nobody seems to care that they need a better space. In this case, despite the general apathy, thanks to the common sense and determination of the wife, the family finally moves to an apartment outside the temple. (The lady, who had already demonstrated self-awareness and self-sufficient thinking capacity, was punished by the group and removed from the inner circle of the surrendered cult members.)

Seven *brahmacaris* live on a microscopic property. There are no bedrooms and so they eat and sleep in the temple room. Apparently, nobody thinks of renting a facility nearby, so that they can have more decent living conditions. What are they thinking; that they will be able to sustain this substandard lifestyle forever, only sustained by their strong faith in the leader? Apparently devoid of institutional memory (what happened to all the similar book distributors of the '70s and the '80s? Where are they now?) and

seemingly unaware of historical perspective, the sect members innocently embrace the kamikaze culture.

A father experiences serious mental problems. He often goes into such deep depressions that for weeks he won't communicate with anyone, even his own family. At that time he doesn't chant his rounds. But due to his unshakable faith in the leader, he is among the trusted lieutenants of the sect and one of its most vocal apologists. Despite his challenges, he serves as the unofficial spokesperson and ideologue of the group.

Should I go on? Better not. These are sad illustrations of how manipulated people sacrifice essential human needs for privacy, health and personal wellbeing in the name of service to the sect.



What about Krishna?

"But what about Krishna," the attentive reader may wonder, "doesn't he give intelligence to His devotees? You wrote that these are 'very good devotees'; why doesn't Krishna protect them from emotional terrorism, exploitation and falling head over heels into the vortex of the sect?"

Yes, Krishna gives intelligence, but He doesn't take away the free will of the individual soul.

Krishna is not a neurotic head of a sect, who, due to childhood emotional deprivations, feels compelled to micro-manage others. No, He is a psychologically well-adjusted individual (in fact, supremely well-adjusted). He didn't have abusive or neglectful

parents. He received a lot of love from Nanda Maharaja and Yasoda Devi. In fact, He had *two sets* of loving parents! You can imagine how mentally healthy Krishna is.



He can help His devotees, but He doesn't force anyone to act according to His will, or to act according to healthy behavior. He says in the *Gita* that He is the witness and the permitter (*upadraṣṭānumantā*, Bg 13.23) but He still leaves the freedom to the devotees to choose their path. At the end of the *Gita*, after instructing Arjuna in detail, He says,

vimṛśyaitad aśeṣeṇa yathecchasi tathā kuru - "Deliberate on this fully, and then do what you wish to do." (Bg 18.63)



Even more relevant to our situation, Krishna says that He reinforces the faith one chooses (Bg 7.21):

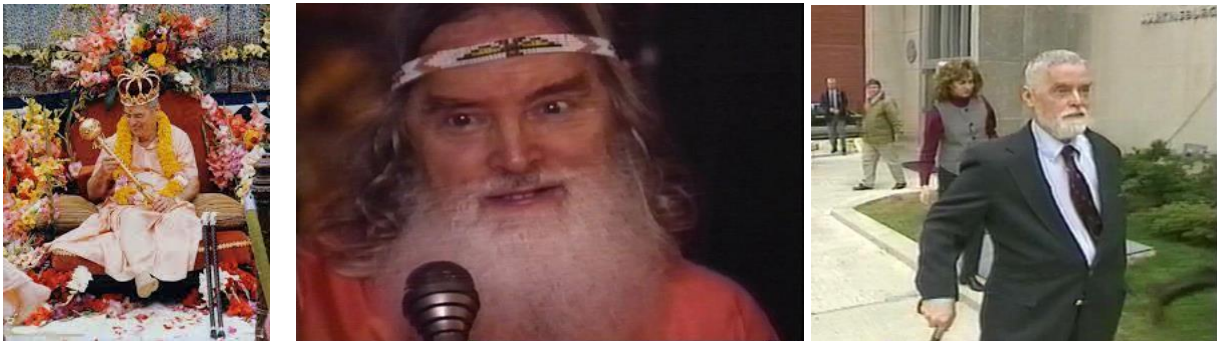
*yo yo yām yām tanum bhaktaḥ
śraddhayārcitum icchatī
tasya tasyācalām śraddhām
tām eva vidadhāmy aham*

Regardless of the object of the faith one wishes to develop, Krishna, in the heart, gives that person a faith that is unwavering (*acalām*); and so the person becomes completely convinced and confident that dedicating to that person or idea is the best.

And so, if a devotee wishes to believe that the leader of the sect is perfect, perfectly pure, perfectly loving, perfect in his understanding, perfect in his perfection, etc. Krishna - perhaps reluctantly - says, "So be it. Have strong faith in this individual."

And South Brazil is not the only case in ISKCON of strong faith in psychologically dysfunctional individuals.

Take for instance Kirtanananda. After all the weirdness he created in New Vrindavana; after his jail sentence; after his sensual indiscretions; after creating so many problems to so many people, there are devotees who still worship him as a special pure devotee. He even has two *samadhis* in Vrindavana!



"But," the reader may object, "Hara Kanta didn't do as many strange and culpable things as Kirtanananda did."

True, and that's why, I believe, Hara Kanta should remain in ISKCON (which Kirtanananda couldn't). But there are similarities. For instance, when New Vrindavana was in the frenzy of productivity (at one point it was the largest dairy producer in West Virginia), and everyone's personal needs were minimized, *grihasthas* lived in tiny little rooms having only a curtain as door. Similar thing in the Curitiba temple: *grihasthas* being asked to live in a single room (despite all the money spent for food distribution).

Regardless of the degree of gravity, unhealthy behaviors need to be addressed. For instance, you *must* give attention to a second degree burn over 50 percent of your body; you cannot say, "Well, it's not a *third degree* burn over *90 percent* of my skin. It's not so serious."

The psychological abuse and the deviance in the southern temples must be addressed, especially because his followers are still young and, if they want, they can reform.

My Personal Observations

I have been dealing with this situation - "The cult in the South" - for more than one year. It soon became clear to them that I will not condone the abuses, the mistreatments, and the deviations. It became clear to them that I won't join the sect. They know very well that I won't compromise the principle of institutional collaboration, the principle of aligning with the authorized ISKCON's structure, or the principle of not rejecting or disobeying one's bona fide guru. They know very well that I consider their claim to a "traditional model" to be largely a tamasic speculation (with a few valid elements).

I tried dialoguing with them - I strongly believe in dialogue - but they rejected it.

Hare Krishna.

Just to give you an example, for Nityananda Trayodasi, in February 2022, after being released from the hospital, contacting their group was one of my first priorities. I wrote them: "May Lord Nityananda bless your spiritual efforts and fill your heart with Gaura-prema! . . . Developing my relationship with the realities of ISKCON in Southern Brazil is one of the main priorities of my service in this country, and so I look forward to starting the dialogue. We can discuss whatever is on your mind, as a group or as individuals. I am also available for personal calls, or for calls with smaller groups - 2-3 devotees - if you prefer."

Nobody accepted to talk.

Then, in April, I personally went to the South, but their mood didn't change. It actually became more tense (because now I wasn't just a name on an email or in a WhatsApp message. Now I was a person in flesh and bones walking among them.) In Porto Alegre, for instance, where I stayed six days, I wasn't allowed to even give a single lecture at the temple. (Isolation is essential to protect sectarian dynamics).

And so I tried. Were my attempts perfect? Of course not! I am imperfect and my efforts were also imperfect. Krishna knows the truth about me and everyone else. In the report I wrote to the national leaders, I again offered to help:

"Among the core leaders in the Hara Kanta Prabhu's group, there is who approached me to share doubts about Hara Kanta Prabhu, his leadership capacity and the value and authenticity of his social policies. My answer to them: Please do not feel guilty. You might have been indoctrinated to see him as perfect and pure, but he has some serious problems. I remain available to you for private and confidential communication."

Inner Torture

"Wait a minute," the reader may say, "are you saying that there are doubts among the leaders connected with Hara Kanta Das?"

I cannot give details, it's delicate and confidential, but, yes, as it is natural, the faith in the leader is cracking. They might still wish to show a united front but doubts and apprehensions have already started to appear in the group - and not just among those who completely left "the sect."



Some of the devotees might be very simple, and so they might not really perceive the contradictions. They work hard, chant their rounds, take *prasadam* and go to sleep. They might believe that this will go on forever.



But some in the group are more subtle (can I say more intelligent?). They must be going through hell. They must be experiencing an agonizing inner battle between what they have been indoctrinated to believe and what they observe as unhealthy and unsustainable.

I don't expect them to take "shelter" in me. They have developed a hostile attitude toward me - and that's fully understandable. I am perhaps the first to work on bursting their bubble in a sustained way and so it's natural that their "party line" is to see me as an antagonist.

This is, in one sense, fine with me. When I accepted this service as Special Duty Officer for ISKCON Brazil I knew that I won't be pleasing everyone (and I knew that I wouldn't even be *trying* to please everyone).

In the South the temples controlled by Hara Kanta wanted a different GBC, someone who perhaps visits occasionally, pats them on the back, "Very good book distribution boys; you are the best!" and then goes away, leaving them to their sectarian ways. They didn't want someone who challenges their nonsenses.

But internally they are in a very vulnerable situation. It's really hard for the ego to recognize: "I was swindled into a cult, and now I have to mend my ways." It takes character, humility, courage. It takes a support network. The ego might explode and just decide to go away from ISKCON, "This nasty place in which my personal affiliation is challenged."

The Various Possible Future Scenarios

We don't know what will happen. Again, people have their own free will.

Ideally, the leaders come together and recognize the dynamics they've got entrapped in, maintain the good things they are doing, but gradually improve what needs improvement and fine-tune their strategy.



They should maintain their respect and gratitude for Hara Kanta Prabhu, but respect doesn't mean submission or surrender; it doesn't mean total subservience. They need to acknowledge whatever good things they received from him, but also admit (first to themselves) that to really advance they must connect also with others; leaders who are more mature, more knowledgeable, less neurotic, less fanatic. Less damaged.

This is not easy, also because there is no sign that Hara Kanta wishes to relinquish any control over "his people". Would he be willing to loosen his grip on the situation? Let's see.

Perhaps the best would be if he can be convinced to move to the holy *dhama* of Mayapur or Vrindavana and spent his last days in India.

Which brings us to the difficult, painful topic of his departure from the world. He is clearly in his "*antya-lila*" - I wish him a serene, healthy old age and a long life.

The moment of transition comes from everyone and generally the cult disbands once its chief controller disappears.

People start fighting for command or, at least, without the "final word" of the chief, tensions and disagreements appear and expand.

Some might try to emulate the controlling style of the leader and capture dominance over a temple or two.

Others, without the energy of the leader to sustain them in their isolation and indoctrination, may just shift their focus to other pursuits, such as taking care of their families.

The more fortunate connect with the richness of association available in ISKCON Brazil and in ISKCON globally. They successfully grow beyond the sectarian mentality and experience, which remains as a "youthful occurrence."

It all depends also on how they will be able to tone down their offensive mentality, the tendency to reject everyone else with vitriolic, nasty comments. *Aparadhas* have their weight. The result (as both Jiva Goswami and Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura explain) can be the loosing of the taste for spiritual life and absorption in frivolous, insignificant things.

We pray that the devotees will be able to reform their ways in this connection and seek the forgiveness of all the Vaisnavas they vilified.

We also hope that Hara Kanta Prabhu and his crew won't take the drastic step of leaving ISKCON - now that their behavior is coming into closer scrutiny. Leaving ISKCON, in a sense, is an easy way out to avoid aligning with the rules and regulations of Srila Prabhupada's Society.

[An Appeal to Senior, Mature Devotees Everywhere](#)

Please, please, please, see how to give good association to these devotees. Yes, they can be nasty and intractable - but they are devotees, they are our people, and they have demonstrated that they can be dedicated and idealistic, although in an immature way.



Right now they are experiencing this "dual citizenship" as members of the Hara Kanta cult and members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness - two positions that are incompatible.

We will see in which direction the needle of their commitment will go, if towards integration into the national and international family, or deeper into the darkness of isolation.

Let me be the "bad guy." You, sweet devotees of the Lord, be their friends, their mentors, their confidential shelters. They are experiencing deep tumult and they should not be left alone. I am asking you to please be present for them, as a beckon of freedom and companionship.



A final quote from the article "How Totalism Works": "In a time of rapid change, huge movements of people and a general sense of instability, people are naturally going to seek security and stability. Cults and totalist regimes thrive in these conditions. Given the right circumstances, almost anyone is vulnerable to the psychological and situational pressures I have discussed. The respected scholars in my field have repeated over and over again that the way to protect ourselves is through *knowledge*. In 1952, Asch wrote: 'The greater man's ignorance of the principles of his social surroundings, the more subject is he to their control; and the greater his knowledge of their

operations and of their necessary consequences, the freer he can become with regard to them.'

This knowledge must be specific: how this process of control works, and how leaders deploy the brainwashing methods of isolation, engulfment and fear . . . We must use these valuable resources, along with the voices of the survivors, to resist."

If you are willing to help, let's talk how to help these devotees and create more harmony in Srila Prabhupada's home.

You can reach me through WhatsApp at +91-7797115154.

Hare Krishna.

